

NAZI BOOK BURNINGS: RECURRING SYMBOL

In nearly every culture and time, writers have struck nerves. Sometimes the same book can even be banned in more than one place and for completely different reasons. Although the May 10, 1933 Nazi book burnings targeted authors' works for their "un-German" ideas, book burnings and book bans were not exclusive to Nazi Germany and did not end with the Third Reich.

The symbolism of the 1933 book burnings has entered into the American culture of politics, film, and even television as a powerful metaphor of demagoguery, censorship, and suppression.

Americans who depend upon free access to information have often focused on the Nazi book burnings as a historical analogy to past and present-day events. For example, in the 1950s—during a period of widespread book banning in US schools and public libraries—the *New York Times* editorialized that the suppression of books was a “species of book burning,” conflicting with basic American ideas of free thought.

In another example, a US senator, speaking in 1953 against censorship, used the term “book burning” as “symbolic of any effort to remove books from libraries.”

“It matters little,” he stated, “whether the removal literally takes the form of burning or consists of storing the books in basements and warehouses.”

Book Burning and the Cold War

During the Cold War, anti-Communism brought about a political climate of fear and anxiety in many American communities.

The symbolism of the Nazi book burnings resurfaced during Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy’s charges of subversion within government. McCarthy used the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations to expose the presence of Communists in the US government. In 1953, he dispatched his aides, Roy Cohn and David Schine, to search US Information Service Libraries in Europe and Asia for “subversive” books. Libraries in Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore burned a few suspect books, giving cartoonists rich material to compare McCarthy-inspired censorship with the bonfires of 1933.

US Information Service Libraries overseas were accused of circulating Communist or pro-Communist books, the State Department produced blacklists, and a few books were burned. However, the Information Service Libraries received no clear criteria about which books to ban. Vice President Richard M. Nixon wanted any author who had taken the 5th Amendment to be banned, while President Eisenhower objected to the disqualification of Dashiell Hammett, whose works he admired. Disagreements within the State Department prompted an internal cabinet memo that observed:

“We cannot screen without looking like a fool or a Nazi.”

The American Library Association issued a manifesto of protest, while cultural critic Howard Mumford Jones wondered what Germans must think of “this variant of book burning” when the information centers “so completely represented the antithesis of Nazi book burning.” The *Washington Post* warned,

“The memory of fascism is keen in Europe and Europeans know that book burning marked the beginning of fascism in Italy and Germany.”

The Nazi Book Burnings in Popular Culture

Writers, filmmakers, and television producers implanted the symbolism of the Nazi book burnings firmly in American popular culture.

Movies aimed at mass audiences make use of the bonfires to convey free speech messages. The imagery has even infused popular television series. In an episode of *M*A*S*H*, Hawkeye Pierce calls the book-burning Major Burns “Dr. Hitler.” On *Twilight Zone*, a librarian accused of “obsolescence” in an authoritarian society exhorts his fascist tormentors, “You cannot destroy truth by burning pages.” In the

1930s world of *The Waltons*, John Boy intercedes to stop the destruction of *Mein Kampf* and a German Bible, and on hearing radio reports from Germany, he exclaims:

"Burning books is like burning people! Why would people do such craziness?"

Book burning is the theme of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, an ironic science fiction narrative about a futuristic, authoritarian society. Manned with flamethrowers rather than fire extinguishers, "firemen" are ordered to find and burn books, for books are considered to be dangerous and seductive, containing ideas that create uncertainty, provoking citizens to think and question. Books are, therefore, a threat to the state-enforced conformity, and must be destroyed.

Storm Center, described by director Daniel Taradash as an "anti-McCarthy film," shows how censorship fueled intolerance in a small American town and led to a catastrophic burning of an entire library. In a scene representing the "strength of democracy," the heroine, a librarian, refuses to remove the book *The Communist Dream*, arguing that during World War II

"there was a book I hated but I kept in the library, *Mein Kampf*. Maybe we risked spreading Hitlerism, but it worked the other way. People read it and it made them indignant. Maybe it helped to defeat him."

The popular movie *Field of Dreams* uses baseball to affirm the values of American individualism. One scene features a PTA debate over a book banning. The heroine challenges a would-be censor:

“Fascist! At least he’s not a book burner, you Nazi cow! . . . Who’s for Eva Braun here? Who wants to burn books? Who thinks we have to stand up to the kind of censorship they have in Russia?”

Director Phil Alden Robinson explained: “I chose to compare these American book banners with the Nazi book burners, because I believe their agenda is comparable: the suppression of opposing points of view for the purpose of increasing political control.”

Resonance

Literary vigilantism today is directed against forces perceived to be corruptive. Boards of education find themselves under pressure to purge school libraries of “unacceptable” literature, pitting parents’ groups against teachers, and states against individual schools. Public libraries face challenges to “objectionable” books based on political, moral, religious, or ethnic concerns. The works of “secular humanists” and “Satanists” are frequently consumed in the ritual fires set by fundamentalist religious groups. The specter of suppression and censorship activates free-speech advocates who not infrequently make reference to the Nazi book burnings. Thus is perpetuated the single, incisive image of censorship and intolerance—and the ground trod by all censors, of whatever persuasion: fire charring a page or a book.

In November 1973, the Drake, North Dakota, school board condemned as obscene Kurt Vonnegut’s book *Slaughterhouse Five*. The novel—a story that sprang from Vonnegut’s own World War II experience as a captured GI in Dresden when the city was firebombed—was torched in the high school furnace by the school janitor. Reactions to the Drake book burning summoned memories of the 1933 “bibliocaust.” The Drake furnace consumed 36 paperback editions of *Slaughterhouse Five*. The *New York Times* exclaimed, “Book burning! Shades of

Adolf Hitler and *Fahrenheit 451*!" The Bismarck (ND) *Tribune* reminded its readers that dictators had burned books as "terrifying object lessons" to would-be dissenters. Vonnegut wrote to the chairman of the Drake School Board:

"Books are sacred to free men for very good reasons. . . . Wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them."

Salman Rushdie, an Indian Muslim educated at Cambridge University, published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. The novel deeply offended Muslims, who viewed it as an offense against Islam. In January 1989, fundamentalist Muslims in England nailed copies of the book to stakes and staged a public burning. Immediately thereafter, the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini issued a ruling (fatwa) that placed a death sentence upon the author. In support of Rushdie, Norman Mailer spoke about cultural terrorism at a P.E.N. American Center rally and a Nation columnist instructed writers to "don the yellow star." The New Republic invoked the "vivid memories" Europeans had of the "terrors" of book burnings. ABC's Nightline featured authors' panels, introduced by film of the Nazi book burnings: "Book burning! To the writer, the reader, the free citizen, it is a symbol of intolerance gone mad."

The popular *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling has occasioned numerous public acts of destruction on the grounds that the books promote witchcraft, sorcery, and Satanism. The American Library Association reported that since 1999, of the hundreds of challenges to remove books from library shelves, *Harry Potter* tops the list. In Alamogordo, New Mexico, a local church staged a ceremonial "Holy Bonfire" to destroy the Harry Potter books and symbols of witchcraft. Announced in advance, the nighttime event attracted worldwide media attention. Protestors against the book burning carried symbols of Nazism. Scores of letters to newspapers invoked the "infamous Burning of the Books," *Fahrenheit 451*, the Taliban, and the "memory of Adolf Hitler." A protestor dressed as Hitler recalled childhood memories of McCarthyism, censorship, and persecution.

Ray Bradbury's introduction to the 1967 edition of *Fahrenheit 451* recalls his childhood love of books and libraries:

"I ate, drank, and slept books. . . . It followed then that when Hitler burned a book I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as his killing a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh. Mind or body, put to the oven, it is a sinful practice, and I carried that with me."

Author(s): United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Critical Thinking Questions

Are books or texts in any format censored in your country? What is the rationale?

Investigate international protections of freedom of press or speech.

How can freedom of the press and freedom of expression be protected?